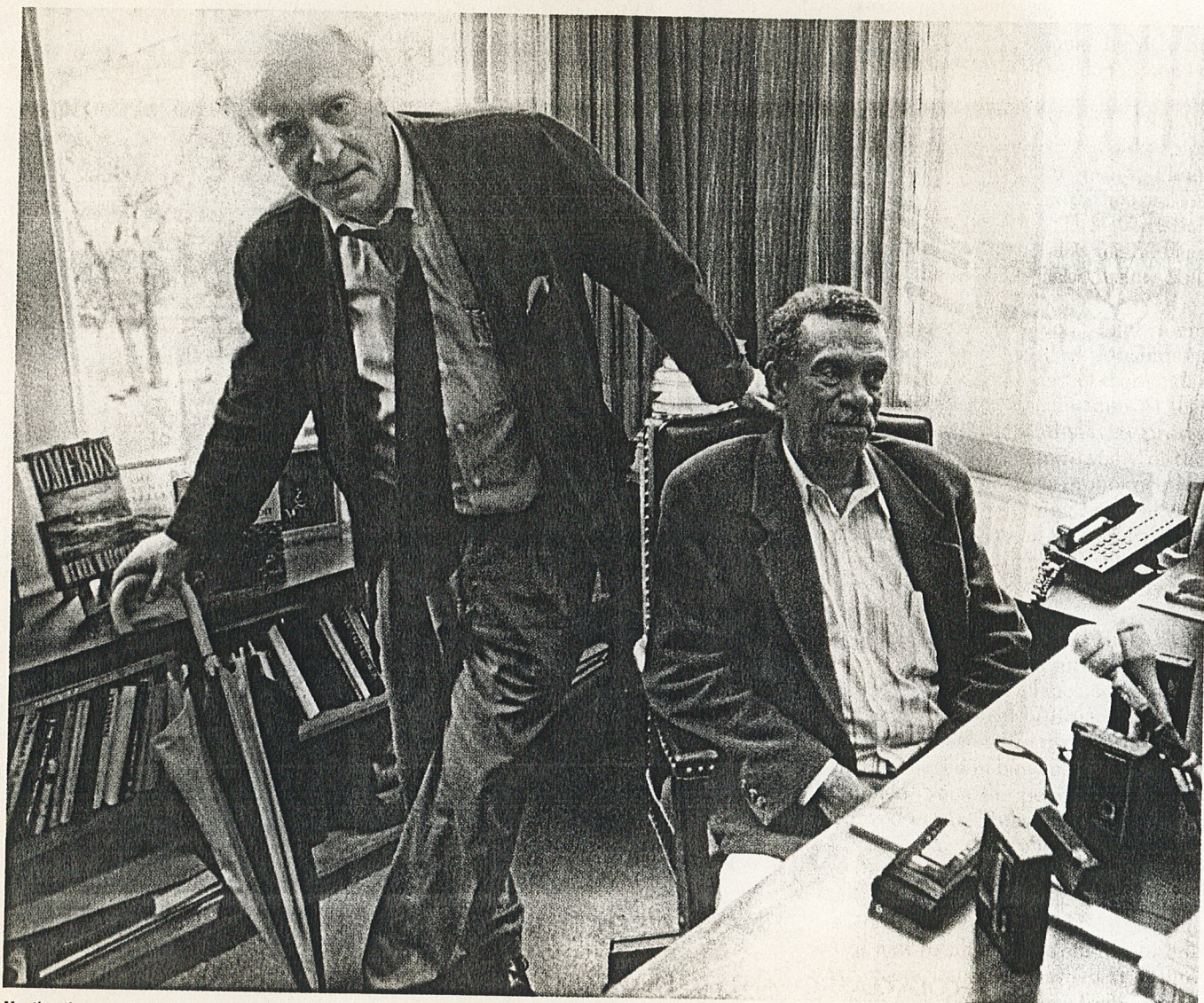




Meeting the press, Derek Walcott (r.), with author Joseph Brodsky, responds to reporters' questions following Nobel Prize announcement.

1992 Nobel Laureate

Black Poet Wins Literature Prize For Writings Evoking Caribbean Life

WHEN rumors swirled two years ago that West Indian poet Derek Walcott was certain to win the Nobel Prize for Literature, premature celebrants began popping corks on champagne bottles. The rumors were unfounded, but

they added to Walcott's stature as a master poet whose works elicit the cultural diversity and the rhythmic cadences of his native Caribbean.

"Two years ago it was very difficult because people were saying I had won and it wasn't true," Walcott says in a lilting West Indian accent. "So, last year, I tried to put it out of my mind as much as possible. But, of course, as the time of the announcement drew near, I thought about it from time to time."

And so, when Walcott was awakened by a ringing telephone in his Brookline, Mass., home last October and heard a

strange voice belonging to the secretary of Swedish Academy of Letters telling him that he had been awarded the coveted prize that carries with it a cash award of \$985,000, he was overcome with feelings of relief and joy.

Walcott, who has lived in the United States since the late 1950s, divides his time between Boston University, where he teaches literature and creative writing, and Trinidad, his adopted home.

The Swedish Academy cited the 62-year-old native of St. Lucia, West Indies, for his "melodious and sensitive" style. "In his literary works, Walcott has laid a

Relaxing at home, Walcott relishes his new-found fame as the first Black writer to win the Nobel Prize for Literature. The college professor was cited for his "melodious and sensitive" style.



DEREK WALCOTT *Continued*

course for his own cultural environment, but through them, he speaks to each and every one of us," the citation reads. "In him, West Indian culture has found its great poet."

With the designation, Walcott becomes the first Black writer to win the Nobel Prize for Literature. His selection is being applauded by both Black and White members of the literati. Novelist Jamaica Kincaid, a native of Antigua, West Indies, says the historical importance of West Indians has finally been acknowledged. And exiled Soviet poet Joseph Brodsky, winner of the 1987 Nobel, who once complained that Walcott had been relegated to a regional status because of "an unwillingness to admit that the great poet of the English language is a Black man," has reason to cheer.

Walcott is deeply influenced by his experience of growing up on the isolated volcanic island in the Lesser Antilles. His latest poetic work *Omeros* (1990), a 325-page tome modeled after Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, attempts to capture the entire spectrum of the Caribbean experience using St. Lucia as its back-

drop. Yet, other poems are more intimate, revealing his feelings on his homeland's former status as a British colony and his mixed-race ancestry, which blends African, Dutch and English bloodlines. In his autobiographical poem, "Another Life" (1973), Walcott describes himself as "the divided child of the wrong color."

Walcott's poems reflect the idioms, folkways and cadences of his beloved West Indies, yet he remains immensely respectful of the structural traditions of English poetry and works within the classic framework of the genre. By achieving this he has cast off the contemporary notion that poetry must be unmetered, unrhymed and unstructured to be expressed freely.

Born in 1930, in the town of Castries, St. Lucia, Walcott recalls growing up with an elder sister and his twin brother, Roderick, also a poet, in a home filled with books and with a mother who recited Shakespeare to him. Walcott's parents, who were both schoolteachers, are deceased. The poet, who has a son and three daughters, has been married three times and is divorced. A female compan-

ion accompanied him to the Nobel ceremony.

From a very early age, Walcott expressed an interest in poetry, playwriting, journalism and painting. In 1950, he won a scholarship to the University of the West Indies in Jamaica, where he majored in French, Latin and Spanish. He was awarded a Rockefeller Foundation grant in 1957 and 1958 to attend directing classes in New York. At 30 years old, he had already published two volumes of poetry, had founded the Trinidad Theater Workshop and his plays were being staged throughout the Caribbean and in London.

At the Nobel ceremony in Stockholm, Sweden, Walcott praised Caribbean culture saying, "it is based on joy and not the seriousness that comes only out of a culture with four seasons."

While the poet is relishing his elevated stature as a Nobel laureate, he maintains an abiding respect for his native Caribbean, which is the singular source of his vision. "I think that this prize should give a great boost to writers in the Caribbean, of which there are many excellent ones."